



RANTS & RAVES

While **Mel Croucher** is delighted that WiFi access is now a cut above what it used to be, poor **Simon Edwards** is losing his data and becoming concerned about the weirdest car crash you'll ever encounter

DECENT EXPOSURE

Mel Croucher **RAVES**

Hello? Are you receiving me? Ah, there you are. I'm sitting in headhairdressing.co.uk, typing these words on an unfamiliar keyboard. Until a few hours ago, I was convinced that my fine silver tresses gave me an air of distinction and that my wild prophet look was similar to the one favoured by the mature Albert Einstein. Now, motivated by a gang of schoolgirl trollops who gathered around me chanting "Worzel

Gumidge", I am having my first haircut for several years.

Things have definitely changed for the better since my last trim, and it's all down to internet access. I am

the weeken sir?" barber shop that I remember. There is one barber bending over the sort of big chair in which they electrocute Texans, and I have to wait my turn. The barber

Motivated by a gang of schoolgirl trollops who gathered round me chanting "Worzel Gumidge", I am having my first haircut for several years

not sitting in one of those unisex hairdressers, and nor am I sitting in the sort of salon that offers leg waxing, spray-on tans and a nipple-piercing service. This is definitely the sort of "short back and sides, something of

offers me a cup of coffee and says I can use the computer terminal on the coffee table. That's right, no ancient copies of *Scurf Monthly* here, but a free broadband connection complete with an online jukebox. I've already

made a Scissor Sisters joke, and the barber is too polite to say he's heard it before.

PUBLIC ACCESS

I am using broadband connections in public places more and more often. The most welcome trend is that enterprising commercial premises are offering free internet access. Contrast this with the outrageous connection charge of £15 a day that the Kensington Hilton Hotel tried to charge me when I was on my last conference weekend with Analogues Anonymous. It's little wonder that scribbling gypsies such as I have adopted WiFi-enabled laptops at the earliest opportunity. Why pay £15 a day to be tied to a hotel room when the same service can be had for free on the streets?

Last month, a mile-long stretch of Islington was blanketed with free WiFi access, making it London's biggest hotspot. I know this is a long way behind such countries as Finland, where all centres of population are covered for free internet connection, but it is the shape of things to come. Free broadband access is a definite incentive for people to frequent a



GOING NUTS & BANANAS

Simon Edwards **RANTS**

In 1771, Nicolas Joseph Cugnot's steam-powered car crashed into a brick wall. Since then vast numbers of cars have crashed into walls, each other and people with gay abandon. But cars have now found a new way to crash.

The days when you could fix a car with lots of willpower and a hammer are fast disappearing. Today's modern, well-equipped garage has replaced spanners, screwdrivers and oily rags with shiny new laptop computers. Mechanics don't need to listen to the timbre of the engine any more; they just wire up a diagnostic gadget to the car's onboard computer and let the electronics get on with it.

Soon engineers won't even have to bother with anything as tiresome as wires. Manufacturers have started to equip cars with Bluetooth, so it's feasible that soon our cars could be serviced wirelessly. At the moment the situation is more pedestrian, with Lexus and Toyota Prius models allowing drivers to upload their personal contacts from Bluetooth-

enabled phones to the car's onboard phone. You can't yet control your new car remotely using a phone, James-Bond style.

But it's not too soon for people to start worrying about computer viruses infecting cars. What could be more disastrous? You're doing 70mph down the motorway and suddenly the brakes jam on or off. Or the car purges its oil. Or the MP3 stereo plays your secret collection of Ricky Martin tracks at top volume, while all the windows wind up and down for the remainder of your journey. This theoretical virus, let's call it Worm.SymbOS.Herbie.a, could affect your car in any number of potentially fatal or embarrassing ways.

CRASH THE DRIVE

Finnish anti-virus company F-Secure has already started some research in this area. In May some of its researchers drove a Toyota Prius down to an underground testing area, 42 metres below sea level. They ran tests to see if it was possible to upload a virus to the car using both a phone that had been paired with the car's own Bluetooth phone, and one that had not. If the second experiment succeeded, there would be a risk that just walking past

a Prius or Lexus with an infected phone could pass a virus to the car.

None of the tests succeeded. The car refused resolutely to accept the virus files and everyone breathed a sigh of relief. But then things took a more sinister turn. In F-Secure's words, "After some tests we got a surprising result: suddenly all the dashboard warning lights came on. The car went totally dead. Even the door locks didn't open any more. The onboard computer displayed a severe warning: 'The transmission lock mechanism is abnormal. Park your car on a flat surface, and fully apply the hand brake.'" Disappointingly there was no mention of flapping engine bonnets. The Prius did not go bananas.

The car had crashed, in the computer sense of the word. The researchers rebooted the car and managed to escape from the cockpit. Two further tests brought the same results. Had a virus actually managed to infect the car? No. The car's battery had run flat. After all the tests, the voltage had run so low that the car's computer systems failed.

For now our cars are virus-proof, but how long will we have to wait before we apply the brakes, just to hear the dashboard emit the dreaded words, "I'm sorry, Dave, I'm afraid I can't do that"?

particular café, bookshop, pub or, in my case, this little barber shop in a provincial city.

FINGER ON THE BUTTON

Now all I have to do is access my remote email account and press a button. If you are reading this, the future is here and it works just fine. If you are not reading this, there is a shiny space on the page where my output should be. Rather like the barber's astounding exposure of a shiny space where my hair used to be. I am now ready to face the schoolgirl squad. I shall baldly go.

BACK AWAY

Simon Edwards **RANTS**

Oh. My. God. Not again. Please, not again. I'd just plugged my USB flash drive into a PC to access my database. This is not just any database, I should point out. It contains some incredibly important data. If I lost this data I would be in trouble with the law, because the tax man doesn't like to hear that you've lost your records

If I lost this data I would be in trouble with the law, because the tax man doesn't like to hear that you've lost your records accidentally. He doesn't like it to the tune of £500

accidentally. He doesn't like it to the tune of £500.

I didn't want a fine; I wanted the PC to pop up a window and show the contents of my USB flash drive. Instead, it said, "The disk in drive E is not formatted. Do you want to format it now?" I broke into a sweat and my colleagues supportively broke into cheers of laughter and derision. "Got a backup, Mr Technical Editor?" taunted Ben. "That's *Rants and Raves* written then," chortled the editor. Ha ha... ha.

You'd think I'd have learned by now. Over the years I have used floppy disks, Zip disks and USB flash drives to help me carry around essential files on a daily basis, and they always fail me in the end. But it's just so tempting to trust them when the alternative is to lug around a laptop or, heaven forefend, back

up the removable disk regularly. Backups are boring.

FLOPPING HECK

That floppy disks fail is not surprising. They are dull, dusty old things with moving parts and thin, fragile plastic shells. Iomega Zip disks are bigger, sturdier and, if my experience is anything to go by, just as prone to failure at the critical moment. When the 100MB capacity afforded by the older Zip disks was no longer enough, I tried the chunkier Iomega Jaz disk. The version I used could store 1GB of data. Mine lasted a couple of months before dying. Could a USB flash drive be the answer? They are tiny and have no moving parts, which is good news. But they are clearly just as vulnerable to rogue magnetic fields as the other types of disk, which is bad. Very bad.

Don't think that floppy, Zip and Jaz disks and USB drives are entirely rubbish, though. They all have their place, but that place is not as the sole repository of your most important files. Use them as a last resort for moving files, when more reliable methods such as a local network, email or carrier pigeon are unavailable.

You'd think I'd have learned by now. And I had, sort of. A couple of weeks previously I'd considered the possibility that I might lose my USB flash drive. I copied my database to a server and spent an hour polishing my halo smugly. In the end I restored this backup and updated it from my own, increasingly unreliable, memory. I was lucky this time.

To prevent a similar situation I will now implement a regular backup system. I've just got a couple of other, more interesting things to do first. **ES**

CONTACT

MEL CROUCHER

mel@computershopper.co.uk

SIMON EDWARDS

simon@computershopper.co.uk